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The Role of Atmosphere in Negotiations of Groupness: A Study of a Meeting Place for Older Russian-speaking Migrants

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ABSTRACT

While existing literature on third-sector support for ageing migrants shows that social clubs can be a vital source of social support, what remains unclear is how these positive outcomes are attained on an interactional level. Drawing on fieldwork conducted over the course of one year in a meeting place for older Russian-speaking migrants in the capital region of Finland, this paper adopts a processual approach to examine how a sense of groupness is negotiated in the meeting place. The attendees of the meeting place comprise of different nationalities and backgrounds, who mainly share age and Russian language. This heterogeneity creates a situation where the attendees, together with the organisers, negotiate a sense of groupness with the category of ‘Russian-speaking’. I argue that such a sense of groupness is reached by drawing from shared traits of culturality, while excluding aspects that could cause conflicts. The paper further contributes to the literature on groupness by analysing what role atmosphere plays in attaining a sense of groupness, and argues that the notion of atmosphere is important to take into consideration when thinking how different places can support ageing and wellbeing.




KEYWORDS

Groupness; atmosphere; Russian-speaking; older migrants; third sector; Finland

Introduction

This article introduces findings on connections between *groupness* and *atmosphere* in a meeting place for older Russian-speaking migrants. The notion of atmosphere remains overlooked in research on the positive attributes that social clubs can have for older migrants. I argue that groupness and atmosphere are interlinked and are mutually constitutive, and that the notion of atmosphere opens up more understandings in studying groupness, and allows for a better understanding of how groupness is formed and how it operates.

There has recently been an increased focus on the study of ageing migrants across a range of disciplines (see Ciobanu, Fokkema and Nedelcu 2019; Torres 2019; Victor, Burholt and Martin 2012). In Finland, the number of foreign-born people aged 55+ is

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increasing at the third-highest rate in Europe after Luxembourg and Portugal (Ciobanu, Fokkema and Nedelcu, 2017: 165), and Russian-speakers are the largest migrant language group in Finland, with approximately 77,000 people (Statistics Finland 2018). In particular, older migrants who are not fluent in the Finnish language face a challenging situation. To be able to navigate the Finnish public services, run everyday errands and attend recreational activities and hobbies demands in most cases a knowledge of Finnish, Swedish or English. Moreover, learning a new language at an older age can be demanding, especially if cognitive skills decline (Burke and Shafto 2004). Lack of language skills can mean that there are a limited number of places where older migrants might feel comfortable. In such situations, those that do exist become very important. Often, this is where third sector initiatives¹ take responsibility for filling gaps in public services (Barnes 2011: 84) or for providing social support.

Previous research on third sector activities directed at older migrants has shown that these are important in, for instance, dealing with feelings of nostalgia (Patzelt 2017: 231), reducing loneliness (Cela and Fokkema 2017) and increasing feelings of social embeddedness (Palmberger 2017: 246). Moreover, feeling attachment to places is an important determinant on ageing experiences in the context of migration (Palladino 2019: 6). However, in evaluating the positive attributes of these places it has been left unclear how the outcomes are brought about on an interactional level. This paper takes on a processual understanding of how a sense of groupness (Brubaker 2009; Brubaker and Cooper 2000) is negotiated in a meeting place organised for Russian-speakers aged 65 and over. The people I studied had mostly migrated at an older age.² This is important to note, as there are different challenges to ageing as a migrant, as opposed to migrating at an older age (Torres 2006: 1344). I refer to groupness as a dimension that varies with the level of social integration among a set of people (McGrath 1984). Furthermore, I argue that a sense of groupness and an affective atmosphere (Böhme 1993; Anderson 2009) are mutually constitutive, and that therefore it is important to consider both when seeking explanations for why social clubs can be important for older migrants.

The article first introduces the older Russian-speaking migrants in Finland and the meaning of third sector support for them. The theoretical framework is structured around the concept of groupness. The article contributes to the literature on groupness by considering the notion of atmosphere as important for understanding how a sense of groupness works in a specific setting. The analysis looks at how negotiations of groupness are conducted by mobilising and de-mobilising certain aspects of culturality (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006: 475, 482). Finally, I analyse the intertwinements of groupness and atmosphere and their implications.

Older Russian-speaking Migrants in Finland and Third Sector Support

The Russian-speaking population in Finland is heterogeneous, as it contains different nationalities, religions and other backgrounds (Leitzinger 2016: 41, 70). In addition, the Russian-speakers are culturally heterogeneous, and develop multi-layered conceptions of belonging (Davydova and Heikkinen 2004). Previous research has shown that Finns tend to have more positive attitudes towards migrants from similar cultures and countries with a high standard of living. Russian-speaking migrants comprise an exception, in that they are both culturally and by appearance close to Finns, but are

among the least-valued group of migrants, together with Arabs and Somalis (Mähönen and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013: 248–249). Although by appearance, Russian-speakers tend to blend into the mainly white Finnish society, their non-Finnish background can be revealed when speaking, as having an accent can label them as ‘audible minorities’ (Ryabov 2016: 294; see also Krivonos 2018). Russian-speakers are also subject to prevalent stereotypes; an image of people coming ‘from the East’, the men being criminals and the women prostitutes, has been reproduced in Finnish media (Liebkind et al. 2004: 238; Leinonen 2012). Moreover, the history between Finland and Russia is one where Finnish national identity partly rests on ‘not being Russian’ (Puuronen 2011) due to Finland having been a part of the Russian Empire between 1809 and 1917, and wars between the countries. These historical trajectories, together with prevalent stereotypes, create an everyday environment for Russian-speakers that is not neutral; they live in a society that has a deeply-rooted prejudice against them.

Heikkinen (2011: 391) found that older Russian-speaking migrants in Finland take part in civic activities offered by churches and third sector organisations. Active participation in these activities contributed to ‘integration’, and gave the study participants a sense of belonging. The discrimination experienced by Russian-speakers in Finnish society can however push them to gather in places directed especially towards Russian-speakers, instead of attending places that are intended for the general older population. Self-preservation can play a part, as being discriminated against can decrease trust in the surrounding society (Heikkinen 2011), decrease quality of life and increase the prevalence of mental health problems (Castaneda et al. 2015). Various third sector initiatives, whether social clubs or meeting places, can thus have strong positive impacts on the everyday lives of older migrants. As Palmberger (2017) found, older migrants who have access to cultural, political and religious voluntary associations feel socially well embedded. Cela and Fokkema (2017: 1197) studied older migrants in Italy and found that even though they were surrounded by family and satisfied with the contacts they had with relatives, they nevertheless expressed feelings of loneliness due to a lack of meaningful relations with non-related age peers. Contacts with co-ethnic peers reduced these feelings of loneliness. Moreover, many gerontologists argue for the importance of peer support in later life (Breytspraak 1984). Patzelt (2017: 227–228) found that older migrants who took part in social activities wished not only to establish social contacts, but to find a way to deal with nostalgic longings for their home country. Hence, places where older migrants can meet peers have multiple positive effects on the attendees.

The meeting place at the focus of this article is a site where Russian-speaking people from geographically and nationally diverse backgrounds (Russia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Kazakhstan, returnees from Ingria, including Ingrian Finns), who are connected only by age and language, come together and form a setting where they can share their everyday lives, but also receive assistance with service use. In order for the place to become something important in the lives of the attendees, I argue that a sense of groupness needs to be established among and between them and the organisers of the meeting place, and that this sense of groupness requires negotiations. The next section first unpacks why replacing ‘groups’ with the notion of groupness makes more sense theoretically as well as analytically, and then begins to explore how atmosphere might be intertwined with groupness.

Groupness as the Result of Interactions with People and Space

The category of ‘Russian-speakers’ is in Finland used in research (see, for instance, Krivonos 2018; Lehtonen 2016; Mähönen and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013) as well as in official documents (Davydova-Minguet et al. 2016). In addition, the meeting place was created for ‘Russian-speakers over the age of 65’. In other words, various parties acknowledge the existence of the category ‘Russian-speakers’ (understandably for practical reasons, as also in this paper). However, talking about the Russian-speakers who gather in the meeting place or beyond as ‘a group’ is problematic because, as noted above, they have heterogeneous backgrounds. Furthermore, the mere presupposition of a group lacks analytical leverage. I am interested in whether the ‘Russian-speakers’ themselves use this definition, and more importantly, what being ‘Russian-speaking’ means in the context of the meeting place. Moreover, the analysis below focuses on what the category of ‘Russian-speakers’ can create in the context of the meeting place. In this paper, I avoid what Brubaker (2009) calls groupism, meaning that I do not take this category (Jenkins 2000, 2008) of ‘Russian-speakers’ to exist as such. Instead, I use the category for heuristic means, because it can provide a basis for studying people with certain commonalities (Ratcliffe 2013: 308). While Brubaker’s (2009; Brubaker and Cooper 2000) work focuses on ethnicity as well as identity, what I take from his theorisation is a dynamic and processual understanding of groupness (Brubaker 2009: 29), which I use to uncover how groupness works in a particular setting. Moreover, I follow Brubaker’s notion of using groupness (Brubaker 2009: 30 borrowing from Tilly 1978) as an analytical tool. Groupness refers to ‘the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group’, as well as sameness among members and distinctiveness from non-members (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 10, 20). I use the term as a variable that is not presupposed (Brubaker 2009: 30) and that has different embodiments, and thus I treat it as an emergent property in a particular setting (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 28). Groupness is an important aspect to observe in the meeting place, as being a member of ‘a group’ can be a strong social and psychological resource (Haslam et al. 2011: 324).

However, I acknowledge that the Russian-speaking migrants who gather at the meeting place have certain conjunctive traits, which are strongly connected to the notion of culture. Due to the elusive nature of the concept of culture (Morrissey 1997) I follow Abdallah-Pretceille’s (2006: 475, 482) move away from using culture as a stable entity, and conceptualise ‘the cultural stuff’ (Barth 1969) as *culturality*, which is focused on different fractures, differences, hybrids and crossings which carry meanings. I conceptualise culturality as something that the attendees can draw meanings from, and by doing so create something new in the meeting place. I argue that by drawing from these shared meanings, the attendees purposely negotiate a sense of groupness.

This article takes a spatial (see Broerse and Spaaij 2019, Fortier 1999, 2000; Fuller and Löw 2017; Rowles and Bernard 2013) approach, as these negotiations happen within a particular space. Groupness is of use analytically, but I argue that adding the notion of *atmosphere* as an additional lens through which to theorise the spatial dimensions of groupness allows for a more nuanced understanding of how a sense of groupness is established and sustained. Atmosphere is a relation that emerges from the presence and interaction of different subjects and objects in a place (Böhme 1993, 2006; Anderson 2009). In this paper, atmospheres are understood to have ‘spatially discharged affective qualities, autonomous from the bodies they emerge from’ (Anderson 2009: 80). Hence, I approach

atmosphere as *affective*, the affect being a capacity (Anderson 2006: 735), possessed by the bodies in the meeting place, to be affected and to themselves affect. In other words, the concept of atmosphere allows me to bring to the fore the intangible aspects of groupness. In their study of kinship, Mason and Davies (2009: 587–588) highlighted the importance of ‘sensory intangibility’ in spotting resemblances between family members, which can reside in similarities in character or spirit. In a similar vein, an atmosphere can be the result of a similarity of character or spirit, which, though intangible, forms a vital part of what a sense of groupness is in the meeting place. An atmosphere is on the one hand an outcome of the negotiations of groupness, but on the other essential for the formation of a sense of groupness. A focus on atmosphere thus extends existing theorisation of groupness by highlighting the intangible and spatial dimensions of how groupness is achieved. Thus, my analysis ties together the negotiations of groupness in a setting and combines it with the hitherto under-studied role that atmosphere plays in groupness, its emergence and upkeep. Observing not only how people consciously and purposefully negotiate a sense of groupness but also something as intangible as atmosphere demands a certain methodological approach, which I present in the next section.

The Site of Research, Data and Methods

The site of the research is a meeting place for Russian-speakers over the age of 65 in the capital area of Finland. The building where the meeting place is situated was erected when Finland was part of the Russian Empire, and the connection between the architecture and the era the building represents should not be dismissed, as it might have an impact on experiences of belonging (Leach 2002: 132). The meeting place has become an important venue for Russian-speakers where they can meet and spend time together five days a week, from Monday to Friday. The activities on offer include different forms of exercise, handicrafts, guided walking tours, spa trips, dancing, choir singing, drawing, Finnish and English language practice, puppetry and health clubs. The meeting place is also simply a place to talk and play board games. When the attendees enter the meeting place, they greet each other in a friendly manner, enter the room where the activity they have come to attend is happening, or simply help themselves to a cup of tea that is always available and sit down to chat. In addition, there is an opportunity each week to book an appointment with a service advisor if one needs assistance with issues such as using a smartphone, understanding Finnish public services or booking a doctor’s appointment. Participation in social clubs varies among different genders, particularly among certain migrant groups (Ciobanu, Fokkema and Nedelcu 2017: 177); at this particular meeting place, the majority of the attendees are women.

This paper is grounded in fieldwork I conducted in the meeting place over a period of one year (2018–2019). The data consist of around 150 hours of participant observation (Gobo 2008: 5), semi-structured interviews with the attendees of the meeting place (N=12), follow-up interviews assisted by interaction diaries (May and Muir 2015) written by the attendees (N=10), stakeholder interviews (N=5), documents written by the organisers of the meeting place (statements of purpose, plans of action and grant applications), and video recordings of three different celebrations organised by the meeting place. The study has obtained ethical clearance.

During my observations, I attended all the clubs and participated in their activities. Using a method of participant observation meant that instead of me imposing my interpretations of what was going on, the attendees were able to construct their own categories of meaning and convey them to me. In a similar vein to Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008), who used participant observation to see when *nationhood* is elicited, participant observation allowed me to observe *groupness* and its negotiations and elicitations. I saw, sensed, felt, smelled, and heard the different things that contributed to groupness, and was exposed to the atmospheric aspects in the setting. All notes were written in a field journal, in which I described the everyday events and interactions in the meeting place, as well as the atmospheric aspects. When I began the observations, the meeting place had been active for four years. In total, around 250 people have attended the meeting place since it opened. The number of daily visitors averages at around 40, and I observed new attendees coming every week. This meant that some modes of groupness had been established, but the negotiations were ongoing as new people came to the meeting place.

I transcribed the field journal into an electronic format and began with the method of close reading (Watson and Wilcox 2000), and analysed the journal with the help of conventional qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The field journal is the primary source of data for this paper, but it is complemented by the interview data. I analysed the field journal and interviews inductively and looked for observations on how groupness was negotiated by the attendees and the organisers, and how different shared aspects of culturality were mobilised. I also looked at what challenged a sense of groupness, and which topics or modes of interaction were deemed unfit for the meeting place. The interviews comprised a broad variety of topics, hence in the analysis I focused on segments where the attendees and organisers talked about the meeting place.

The twelve attendees interviewed for this study were all migrants, and were selected to represent a range in terms of length of residence in Finland: the first moved in 1990 and the latest in 2015. The age of the interviewees varied between 68 and 83 and their median age was 71. Most of the attendees in the meeting place are women, which is reflected in the interviews (10 women and 2 men). The main language of the meeting place is Russian, hence all the activities are in Russian. I conducted 11 of the interviews in Russian, one in Finnish. Before the interview, I asked the interviewee what her/his preferred language was. All the interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees, transcribed and anonymised. As for my own background, I am Finnish, but speak Russian. Sharing the same language but different cultural backgrounds can encourage research participants to articulate different societal phenomena more clearly (Pietilä 2010: 415–416), as I also found to be the case when performing participant observations and conducting interviews.

Negotiations of Groupness in the Meeting Place

This section introduces findings on how groupness was negotiated in the meeting place by mobilising shared traits of culturality, as well as excluding aspects that would potentially influence groupness negatively. First, I introduce findings on how the attendees themselves created a category of ‘Russian-speakers’ in the meeting place and the different traits they associated with it. Then, I move on to explore aspects of culturality

that were negotiated or that were available to be mobilised to unite the attendees. This includes linguistic means of building groupness as well as topics or behaviours that were excluded in order to bolster groupness. The final section focuses on the notion of atmosphere, which, I argue, is vital in gaining a more nuanced understanding of the different dimensions that help constitute groupness.

The Category of 'Russian-speakers' in the Meeting Place

What united the attendees was their fluency in Russian language, combined with poor Finnish language skills. Identifying with a category is more likely if it is chosen rather than imposed, and if the category is associated with positive definitions (May 2010: 440). As noted above, Finnish-born people often associate negative connotations with the category of 'Russian-speakers', but within the interactions in the meeting place, the positive attributes of the category were highlighted. The attendees mainly used 'Russian-speakers' (русскоязычные or русскоговорящие) to talk about themselves and other attendees; this is why I have also decided to use the category of 'Russian-speakers' to talk about the attendees in this paper. Our ability to identify members of familiar categories grants us the illusion that we know what to expect from 'them' (Jenkins 2008), and the category of 'Russian-speakers' was something that provided the attendees with expectations of shared similarities. Groups may internalise categorisations imposed by others and identify with them (Jenkins 2008), which is why it is difficult to distinguish whether the attendees defined themselves as 'Russian-speakers' or whether they accepted this definition after they started attending a place for 'Russian-speakers'.

Ryabov (2016: 291) found that the Russian-speaking women he studied in the US often identified with the 'Russophone community', which was more an imagined rather a 'real community', consisting of people who shared the Soviet Union as their country of origin. In the meeting place, in addition to speaking the same language and being of a similar age, the attendees also shared the background of having grown up in the Soviet Union:

Because anyways it was the Soviet Union that governed everyone [talking about the attendees]. (Interview with the organiser 1_1)

Tiaynen-Qadir (2020: 9) found that for older Russian-speaking migrants, participating in a social club was a strategy to develop a sense of relatedness to Finland, but also a way to retain one's 'Russian habitus'. Moreover, she argues that attending the club had strong connections with the attendees' socialist past. Our sense of self is also anchored in relation to collective histories (May and Muir 2015) and sharing a collective history is a resource to draw similarities from.

The most distinct differences between the attendees came from having different national and geographical backgrounds. The different backgrounds became evident in the interviews with the attendees and the organisers of the meeting place, but were also observable, especially during the different celebrations held at the meeting place. In such situations, the attendees emphasised their different national backgrounds, whereas in the weekly mundane interactions this was not the case. There were also people of Finnish background who had attended the meeting place in the past, but who had stopped coming:

... for our work, it does not matter who the person is by nationality. We even took [as attendees] Finns who spoke Russian. For some reason they did not stay ... We ask neither about religion nor their faith nor their origin because it does not affect the work. (Interview with the organiser 2_1)

This indicates that there is something in the meeting place that can exclude people who only share the same language and age. I argue that this factor is shared culturality; something that attendees with a Finnish cultural background might not share with others at the meeting place, but are more likely to share were they to attend the many other clubs that are available to the majority Finnish-speaking older population. In the next excerpt, the interviewee is an Ingrian Finn, who is a returnee and speaks both fluent Finnish and Russian:

Q: For whom do you think this place is important?

A: For these Russian-speakers. For me it's maybe not so important because I can also go to Finnish-speaking places, but for those who, and at this age you cannot learn the language [Finnish] anymore. (Interview with attendee 7_1)

Ingrian Finns are a specific case in comparison with the other Russian-speakers, as their Finnish language skills are better, but they also grew up in the Soviet Union while retaining a 'Finnish identity', though a problematised one (Varjonen, Arnold and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013). Hence, not having other places to attend due to limited language skills is also an important factor in bringing the Russian-speaking attendees together. However, the conjunctive traits of Russian language skills and a shared upbringing in the Soviet Union on their own did not create groupness, but merely a category of similar people. The next section moves on to discuss findings on how the negotiations of groupness were conducted by the attendees and the organisers.

Drawing Boundaries and Creating Something New

Barth's (1969) argument that, instead of taking shared culture as an object of study, researchers should focus on how people draw boundaries is of use here. In this section, I examine boundary-drawing as a way of negotiating groupness. Barth notes that there is a large universe of 'cultural stuff' from which actors choose the markers or signs of a particular culture. Creating boundaries between the meeting place and the surrounding society was one way in which the attendees delineated who 'we' were as opposed to 'them' (Lamont and Molnar 2002). I observed that by defining 'them' (Finnish people) and pointing out differences between 'them' and 'us' (Russian-speakers), or by talking about what 'we' thought was appropriate, the attendees were creating a stronger sense of groupness within the meeting place. Here, when I discuss *culture*, I acknowledge Abdallah-Pretceille's (2006: 476) critique of the term and approach it as culturality, and thus pay attention to 'cultural traces' and to how people *select* cultural information in accordance with their interests and changing situations. Moreover, following Fortier (1999: 43), rather than naturalising what happens in the meeting place as 'typical expressions of an identity', or in this case, of 'culture', my analysis shows that what it means to be 'Russian-speaking' is negotiated and created in the context of the meeting place.

The Russian-speakers drew boundaries between Finnish society and the 'Russianness' of the meeting place by pointing out examples of what 'Russians' do and what 'Finnish people' do. Culture gains meaning in relation to other cultures, therefore drawing boundaries is inherent to culture (May 2013: 98). Moreover, the term 'Russian' was, in practice,

used to refer to ‘Russian-speaking’, that is, to the people who gathered in the meeting place. In making statements about others, people often reveal something about themselves (Jenkins 2008: 103). On many occasions, the attendees discussed cultural traits of Finnish people as in one way or another ‘different’. The differences were related to incidents that caused cultural shock in the attendees, such as ‘when I attended my first Finnish language class, the teacher was sitting on the table and neither the students nor the teacher were addressing people formally’. A recurrent topic of discussion was ‘what the Finns do and what the Russians do’, for example, ‘Finnish people talk about the weather whereas Russian people are comfortable talking about their salaries’ (Discussion during a Finnish language class, field journal 20.5.2019). In this vein, what I observed were claims to authenticity and good manners by the Russian-speakers in the meeting place. It is noteworthy that one of the organisers acknowledged that what was being created in the meeting place was not ‘Russian’, but something else:

[Talking about the goal of the meeting place to support older Russian-speaking people] ... in Russian language, in a Russian community, which is less Russian, which was created here. (Interview with the organiser 1_1)

In the quote above, the organiser acknowledged that while Russian language was key to bringing people together, the community that had been created by the attendees was not Russian, but something new. Jenkins (2008: 17) notes that similarity and difference are crucial in identity formation. I argue that creating similarities and differences are also central in creating groupness. A sense of groupness is multi-dimensional and processual. Hence, one way of creating groupness is to create distinctions between the meeting place and the outside world. While this section has focused on the creation of insider-outsider differences, the next section explores the negotiations among the attendees and the organisers within the meeting place.

Creating Groupness by Avoiding Controversial Topics

In his work on sociability, Simmel (1949) proposes that ‘ideal’ social worlds are created by people engaging with each other as ‘equals’. However, the creation of an ‘ideal’ social world requires some artificiality in order to avoid friction between people. This means renouncing certain aspects of social interaction. In this vein, I argue that establishing groupness in the meeting place is also about excluding topics that could cause friction. These topics were mainly politics and religion:

We do not touch upon, of course, politics, or religion, but literature, art ... a variety of current topics. (Interview with attendee 3_1)

It was strongly stated in the interviews with the organisers as well as the attendees that religion and politics were not to be discussed in the meeting place. Neither in the interviews nor during observations did I come across instances when the attendees would talk about these topics. In addition, I observed that the events in and around Ukraine were not talked about:

In the weekly club where the attendees read newspapers in Finnish. The news that concerned Finland and current developments were of interest, whereas when it came to news about Ukraine, the page was turned without comment. (Field journal 26.3.2019)

Bringing such topics to the meeting place could have caused situations where people held contradictory views on current political events, religion or other potentially contentious issues. In his study of a Russian-speaking community in the US, Ryabov (2016: 296) found that political ideologies created conflicts and tensions among people, and that these eventually led to splits in the community. In the meeting place, some attendees could have felt uncomfortable had controversial topics been raised, which in turn could be potentially damaging to a sense of groupness. As the meeting place had become important for the attendees, the organisers as well as the attendees acknowledged that it was better to avoid certain topics altogether. Moreover, as there were not many other similar meeting places in the capital area of Finland, the organisers understood that it was important to keep the place free of conflict. The organisers stated that they ‘stop all conflicts’ [Interview with organiser_2_1], and thus played a role in creating a place where people could feel comfortable. As Russian language is something that all the attendees shared, in the next section I shall further unpack not only the language, but also the linguistic concepts that could be mobilised in interaction to create groupness.

Building Groupness by Mobilising Affective Concepts

In this section, I discuss how attendees and organisers mobilised words with affective meanings as a way of creating groupness. Language reflects a culture and culture is influenced and shaped by language (Jiang 2000: 328). Language is also linked to group recognition in that language can be used to create boundaries and to demonstrate group identity (Hammer 2017: 44; see also Panicacci 2019). However, I argue that a shared language is not enough to automatically build groupness. It is important to understand language as a means by which concepts with affective meanings are actively mobilised to build groupness. In the analysis, as already during my fieldwork, my attention was drawn to uses of the words *dusha/dushevnyi* (soul, soulful). The use of these words offers a clear example of how certain words with strong affective meanings can be mobilised to create a sense of groupness, because concepts can be salient in the construction of belonging (Heyd 2016: 287).

Some words can carry stronger meanings than others, and are more central in meaning-making. Linnet (2011) studied the Danish word *hygge* as a carrier of normative meanings and cultural assumptions. *Hygge* translates to English as cosy, homey, informal, sincere, down-to-earth, warm, close. Linnet (2011: 23) conceptualises the term as widespread, habitual and ritualistic, which I propose is the case with *dushevnyi* as well. In my analysis, I became interested in the word *dushevnyi* as one illustration of how a shared understanding of a word can be utilised to create groupness. Like *hygge*, *dushevnyi* is ubiquitous, hence it is hard to grasp when it is evoked or present, if it is not uttered. Pesmen (2000) conducted extensive fieldwork in Russia studying the terms *dusha* and *dushevnyi*. Words and phrases that were used as synonyms for *dusha* included: internal contradiction and contradictory things, life, hope, conscience, sincerity, music, Russian language, intuition, fluency in culture and habits, interest, the unconscious, friendship, love, compassion and kindness (Pesmen 2000: 311–312). Words or concepts can play a role in narrating and constructing belonging (Heyd 2016), and when this is done in a specific place, the use of a word speaks not only about that place itself, but also about how something might be missing from the surrounding society.

They [the attendees] tell us that the place has become their home ... here the most important thing for them is that the doors open easily ... here they rest with their souls [dusha]. (Interview with the organiser1_1)

For the organisers, it was important to emphasise the aspect of rest and calm, and that the meeting place was somewhere that attendees could be themselves. The word *dusha* was also explicitly used and ‘being able to rest with one’s soul’ was presented as one of the key outcomes of the meeting place. Also, emphasising that the ‘doors open easily for them’ could imply that this was not always the case in the surrounding Finnish society. The word *dusha* did not only come up in interviews or observations. In a speech at a Christmas celebration, one of the organisers stated:

And you repeatedly come to us with different questions, and we are happy to answer, forward your requests or only talk to you from our souls [pa dusham]. (Christmas celebration 2018, organiser’s speech)

Here, *dusha* was raised publicly and explicitly in a speech directed at all the attendees, their families and different stakeholders. This is an example of how the organisers communicate to the attendees an understanding of the nature of the meeting place, as well as expectations of what the place’s atmosphere should be like.

The word *dushevnyi* also came up in health clubs and health-related lectures, where it was used by both the leader of the health club and the attendees. The phrase *dushevnyaya zdorovya* [health of the soul] was used to describe the spiritual and psychical side of health, as opposed to talking only about somatic health. Various actions were described as either harming or nurturing *dusha*. *Dusha* could be, for instance, harmed by negative words, and it could be nurtured by positivity. *Dushevnyi* in these health clubs combined elements of religion and beliefs. I observed it to be important for the attendees to have a place where this concept of *dusha* was shared by everyone, and its rich meanings and connotations understood. The shared concept of *dushevnyi* acted as something that created positive affects and mobilised shared understandings in the meeting place. The word was used to describe the place as such, but moreover it was something that the attendees wanted to be, and by doing so, they were reproducing the values connected to *dushevnyi*.

There are a few other meeting places for Russian-speakers in the capital area, but, as the quote below illustrates, these were not perceived as having a particularly welcoming atmosphere:

I think, one time I tried to talk there [another club for older Russian-speakers], but the place was more formal ... there wasn’t the same heartfelt [dushevnyi] atmosphere as here. (Interview with attendee_8_1)

Hence the word *dusha* or *dushevnyi* was used in the interviews, presented as important during public celebrations as well as used in interactions at the meeting place.

The negotiations of groupness together with mobilising words with affective meanings contributed to a specific atmosphere in the meeting place. This atmosphere turned out to be a key factor in what the meeting place was about, as discussed in the next section.

Atmosphere of groupness

Böhme (1993: 117) talks about similarities between the concepts of *aura* and atmosphere, and notes that an aura is firstly an experience of a mood in the background, and secondly it

is dependent on the receptivity of the observer. Following this idea, I argue that a sense of groupness is what 'sets the scene' where people expect to be treated in a certain way. It is then up to the observer to experience the atmosphere, if s/he is receptive in that moment.

As an atmosphere emerges from, and is created by, people and things, on the one hand it belongs to the subjects, as the atmosphere is sensed by the subjects, and on the other, it is the state of being of the subjects (Böhme 1993: 122).

Pultz (2018: 377) notes how different meanings are not merely produced via language, but by *atmospheres* that affect the production of meaning and the experience of feelings. In the meeting place, I observed that the atmospheric aspects were important in what the place was ultimately about. Furthermore, conceptualising the negotiations of groupness as linked to the production and upkeep of this atmosphere adds to our understanding of how these kinds of places are important for older migrants.

The meeting place had a very specific unrestrained atmosphere where people moved in a relaxed way, and seemed to be comfortable and safe around each other. This was made visible, for example, by the fact that it was appropriate in this setting to put hands on each other's shoulders, to sit or stand close to each other, or to use nicknames when addressing others:

We are here, of course, all different people. But when you come here you quickly understand that you are not alone. That you are needed. That you are a part of a good collective. If someone is not satisfied or is in a bad mood, this also happens to me, my head hurts, I come over [to the meeting place] ... and they ask me something, I say 'not now, later'. They know if Tanya [diminutive of Tatyana] is in such a mood, if this eyebrow is lower than this one, my head hurts. Then people will not touch me. [Interview with attendee 11_1]

Hence, one way to grasp the atmospheric aspects is to pay attention to how people interact with each other. For this attendee, it was important to know that you do not have to explain yourself to others when you are in a bad mood, that you can be yourself and others will give you space. I argue that atmosphere is an important dimension of what made the activities and interactions so enjoyable and meaningful for the attendees. The atmosphere became more evident when it was disrupted. One day I observed a group of three Finnish people standing in the entrance hall talking in Finnish, and they seemed very out of place. Not only their speech but their stiff body language drew my attention to how different it was compared to how the attendees carried themselves and socialised with others (Field diary 4.6.2019).

Moreover, both organisers acknowledged in separate interviews that the main achievement of the meeting place was the atmosphere. Kemple (2003: 145), who studied interactions between teachers and children, found that an 'atmosphere of groupness' began to thrive when interdependence and cooperation were emphasised, leading to a sense of caring, cooperation and belonging among the children. In this vein, emphasising interdependence and cooperation are parallel to what is being done by negotiating a sense of groupness in the setting.

Creating an atmosphere of groupness requires the commitment of all the attendees and special attention from the organisers in order to establish a setting where all feel comfortable. The role of the organisers is important, as they also collect feedback from the attendees, and based on the feedback try to cater to the needs and interests of the attendees. This also provides the attendees with a sense of agency on how the meeting

place is organised. However, this is done within the frame of the action plan the meeting place has provided the funders. A shared atmosphere turned out to be a vital part of the meeting place that was highly valued by the attendees. In this sense, I observed that something unique had been established in the meeting place and learning from the practices that were in place there can be useful in theorising the significance of such meeting places, not only for older migrants, but also for all.

Discussion

Groupness in a setting can be built on the basis of a shared language, and by mobilising different aspects of culturality, but we must also pay attention to intangible dimensions such as atmosphere when theorising how groupness emerges. Through the negotiations of groupness, something new emerges in the setting that is a joint effort of all involved. The different negotiations showed a strong need and commitment to create something, where people of different nationalities could feel comfortable.

I wish to highlight that while 'Russian-speakers' is merely a category, it still has the power to create something new in the context of the meeting place. 'Culture' or, more specifically, culturality provides sets of commonalities from which people can draw similarities. Here, the notion of groupness being 'processual' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 17) is key to understanding how, in the setting, something is being created rather than a static form of culture presenting itself.

The atmospheric aspects arose from emphasising what was shared, which manifested in words such as *dushevnyi* and were mobilised by drawing from traits of culturality. It also involved excluding certain topics of conversation, such as politics and religion. In this way, groupness and atmosphere were mutually constitutive: the affective atmosphere benefited from a sense of groupness and from the commitment and trust of the attendees and organisers, which in turn required a certain kind of affective atmosphere.

This paper has focused on a specific language group, but this type of analysis can be applied to other settings, where people who are bound together by a cultural factor, such as language, come together and form something new. Assumptions should not be made about 'groups' or their 'cultures' before understanding their dynamics. Understanding what is negotiated to be important, and what is negotiated as something that should be excluded, unveils a process, which is important when a heterogeneous 'group' is negotiating their groupness. Understanding how even certain words can play a role in these negotiations (as was the case here with *dushevnyi*) opens up understandings on groupness is negotiated, not only by migrants but by everyone.

The significance of having access to places where it is possible to feel a sense of groupness and be surrounded by a positive affective atmosphere is not specific to any culture, but is arguably a basic human need. In this paper, the focus of the study was migrants, but negotiating groupness in a place and the role that atmosphere plays in this process applies to non-migrants as well. Looking at shared cultural concepts as well as the mobilisation of other traits of culturality can be useful for understanding what makes such venues important among the migrant and non-migrant populations. The notion of atmosphere is overlooked in the literature on groupness and this paper has contributed to better understanding how groupness operates when the notion of atmosphere is included in the analysis.

Notes

1. In this paper, the third sector initiative in question is a meeting place, however, other forms of third sector initiatives applicable can be social clubs or other voluntary-organised activities.
2. The median age of the attendees interviewed was 70 years and the median age of moving to Finland was 56 years.

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